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Feminism in Action: Does Simone de Beauvoir's Life Reflect her Philosophy?

Anna Grindy

Simone de Beauvoir insisted that she was no philosopher, yet she wrote what is widely regarded as one of the first and most influential tracts of feminist prose, *The Second Sex*, published in 1949 and translated into nineteen different languages (Rossi 674). Her philosophy was strongly existentialist, especially concerning the concept of human identity. In his *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Jean-Paul Sartre explains that a human being is one whose “existence comes before its essence.” In effect, we, as human beings, have no necessary or inherent place in the world, and our identity emerges through our actions. When looking back on our life, it is what we did which determines who we were. We can then ask, what did Simone de Beauvoir do? Who was she? And, more importantly, did her actions reflect her philosophy? In her literary works, Simone de Beauvoir used existential ideas to propose new strategies for people, especially women, to live and function in society, and she herself did everything she could to put these ideas into practice in her own life.

In order to explore de Beauvoir's life in relation to her philosophy, it will help first to explain the main ideas of existentialism. Most importantly, meaning is based only in human action, and this premise is what distinguishes existentialism from much of the Western philosophy that came before it. Plato, Descartes, and Kant, for instance, sought to ground human meaning and truth in objective reason; indeed, for Kant, freedom means subjecting oneself to one's own reason. Hegel sought to ground meaning and truth in Spirit. There is a long tradition in grounding truth and meaning either in something outside of human beings (God or Spirit), or in a human capacity that is seen as objective and universal (reason). Existentialism argues that there is no ultimate ground for human meaning, which is only contingent upon human action. Reason does not dictate any particular action, and if there is a God or Spirit (which Sartre and de Beauvoir did not believe), we certainly don't know what it is thinking, so we are radically free. For instance, what we normally consider to be constraints on our action, such as laws or social expectations, are not actually constraints at all; if we follow them, we are choosing to do so, even if we tell ourselves that we have to. Even apparently

obvious choices, such as choosing not to kill someone, remain choices no matter what we tell ourselves.

One might ask why it's important that de Beauvoir's life reflected her philosophy, and the answer lies in the ideas of authenticity and inauthenticity, which are fundamental to the existential system that she, for the most part, adopted. To be authentic is to act and make our choices for ourselves, because we want to, not because others want us to. Inauthenticity, on the other hand, is to act for the sake of duty; we act a certain way because that is how one is supposed to act or how others (even moral people) act ("Existentialism"). The character Garcin in Sartre's *No Exit* is a perfect example of inauthenticity: He claims throughout most of the play to be courageous though he admits later on that in a time of crisis, he acted as a coward. His inauthenticity comes from his shame of having made a cowardly choice; by professing himself as a brave human being rather than claiming his cowardice, he is allowing society's condemnation of cowards to determine his choices. He is not acting for himself, but for others.

In contrast, throughout her life, Simone de Beauvoir's actions were not governed by what was expected of her. She chose at an early age not to marry, and though forbidden to enroll at *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS) because of her sex, she audited classes in order to be properly prepared for the general teaching examination, the *agrégation*. She was open to sexual encounters, spontaneous and long term, with a broad spectrum of both men and women, including famous people – such as journalist Jacques Bost, American author Nelson Algren, and Claude Lanzmann, creator of the Holocaust documentary *Shoah* – and even her young female students; and she continued to support Communism even when most of the Western world disagreed with it. De Beauvoir thus challenged numerous social expectations concerning biological sex, socially constructed gender roles, sexual behavior and attitudes, and the influence of politics and society on all three.

The necessity of authenticity to de Beauvoir's philosophy is reflected in her integration of this concept as a requirement for love. In *The Second Sex* she says, "An authentic love should take on the other's contingency, that is, his lacks, limitations and originary gratuitousness; it would not claim to be a salvation, but an inter-human relation" (711). She also stated,

Authentic love must be founded on reciprocal recognition of two freedoms; each lover would then experience himself as himself and as the other, neither would abdicate his transcendence, they would not mutilate themselves; together they would both reveal values and ends in the world. For each of them, love would be the revelation of self through the gift of self and the enrichment of the universe. (723)

Clearly the relationship that Simone and Jean-Paul shared differed markedly from conventional definitions of romantic love. They never lived together, both had long-term and serious relationships with other people, and their physical relationship seemed of minute or no importance.

Simone de Beauvoir, in fact, condemned the traditional concept of love and the situation in which women in love find themselves. She parallels the situation of the woman in love to that of a woman in a harem:

The worst horror of woman's condition in a harem is that her days are deserts of boredom: when the male is not using this object that she is for him, she is absolutely nothing. The situation of the woman in love is analogous: she only wants to be this loved woman and nothing else has value in her eyes. For her to exist, then, her lover must be by her side, taken care of by her. (*Second* 718)

In stark contrast, the love that she and Sartre shared grew from an understanding that they were both equally dependent on each other, yet also independent of each other. They both had affairs with numerous people, yet their love endured. Love itself is thus for de Beauvoir not simply given; indeed, she argues that society's notion of love is dangerous, so she transforms love itself into an existential concept in order to make it authentic.

Closely connected to the concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity is bad faith, a state described by existentialists in which we deceive and act in a manner untrue to ourselves. In his *Essays in Existentialism*, Sartre describes bad faith as, "Consciousness [which] instead of directing its negation outward turns it toward itself" (148). "In bad faith," he says, "it is from myself that I am hiding the truth" (150). In light of this definition, one could (and should) ask how de Beauvoir, a staunch feminist, could have a life-long relationship with a man who had sexual relationships with innumerable women. Did she just care to overlook the discrepancies between his lifestyle and her philosophy? Had she convinced herself that he respected these women and saw them as equals? If so, it would be a glaring example of someone living in bad faith, hiding the truth about Sartre's true personality from herself, and constantly reassuring and convincing herself that he was not misogynistic. However this was not the case. "Sartre has never been very interested in the question of women," she acknowledged in a 1979 interview ("Simone" 338). She wasn't blinded by love into believing he agreed with her feminist philosophy; she knew very well that he wasn't concerned with at all the woman's situation. But because she experienced an authentic love with Sartre, taking on his "contingence ... [his] lacks, limitations, and originary gratuitousness" (*Second* 711), she did not try to reform him or save him from what she saw as his faults; she acknowledged and accepted their existence. Surely, she hoped that through reading, critiquing, and discussing her work in depth together, he would be

convinced of her arguments, but regardless of whether Sartre ever agreed with her ideas, this intellectual exchange created an “inter-human relation” between her and Sartre.

If one is to continue to question the compatibility of de Beauvoir’s feminism with her relationship with Sartre, it is important to examine Sartre’s habits in the context of his and de Beauvoir’s relationship. The modern western idea of misogyny is often of men who commit to marriage and then have secret affairs, which they either try to cover up or use as an excuse for divorce. However, Sartre was never evasive or dishonest with de Beauvoir about his affairs; they both discussed their contingent relationships openly. Simone agreed to and encouraged this behavior, and even engaged in it herself. Similarly, according to some feminists, a man who has sex with many women is one who necessarily disrespects women, but de Beauvoir was refusing to allow even the established feminist position to determine her actions, just as she would not allow culture’s notions of women to determine them. If she had modified her behavior in reaction to the criticisms of other feminists, she would have been living inauthentically, allowing the opinions and prejudices of others to shape her lifestyle. For her, the basis of feminism is equality, and in their relationship, she and Sartre were equals, and as long as he did not hypocritically demand monogamy from her while pursuing other women, they remained equals. She chose her situation with Sartre, and as long as she made the choice authentically and not in bad faith, there is nothing in her and Sartre’s situation that opposes her feminist platform.

Simone de Beauvoir thus embodies in her relationship with Sartre the very notion of radical freedom that is at the heart of authenticity, and freedom itself is a recurring topic in her work. Their lives are an exploration of human freedom in a godless world with no moral absolutes and a loss of given or transcendent meaning. In this absurd world, there is no such thing as absurd behavior; every action is of equal value. For de Beauvoir and other existentialists, freedom is the ability make choices about every aspect of one’s life; in fact, according to Sartre, one cannot avoid making choices, and in that way, everyone is free (Essays 66). This is an idea that de Beauvoir very strongly affirmed, especially with regards to the woman’s situation. In a 1989 interview, she stated,

One is a girl with a certain physical training, and a certain social training but starting from that, one can choose to accept it or to escape it or to ... Well naturally, the choice itself depends upon a number of things. But after all, there is still some freedom of choice, even in resignation of course. (“Two” 16)

In her own life, Simone de Beauvoir chose to renounce the “physical and social training” which her parents and society in general had enforced upon her and opted for what was considered at the time a more masculine lifestyle.

In choosing never to marry, she lived her belief that marriage deprived a woman of a meaningful life and her freedom:

In marrying, the woman receives a piece of the world as property; legal guaranties protect her from man's caprices; but she becomes his vassal ... The wife has no other task save the one of maintaining and caring for life in its pure and identical generality; she perpetuates the immutable species, she assures the even rhythm of the days and the permanence of the home she guards with locked doors; she is given no direct grasp on the future, not on the universe; she goes beyond herself towards the group only through her husband as a mouthpiece. (*Second* 454-55)

What she knew of marriage she learned from observing the people in her life, and her beliefs were perpetuated by other writers of her time. In *The Second Sex*, she refers to Honoré de Balzac's *The Physiology of Marriage* in which he denounces the idea of marriage as a "simple business deal" and recognizes that "the principle of marriage has nothing to do with love" (465). De Beauvoir justifiably believed that "law and customs still confer a great authority" on the husband because until 1942 (only seven years before *The Second Sex* was published) French law required a woman's obedience to her husband (455).

Sartre once proposed marriage to de Beauvoir in an effort to keep them together during the war, but she refused him: "I remained a feminist. I did not at all want to attach myself to a man by the ties of marriage" ("Two"). Even if all other aspects of their relationship had remained the same, to have married for the sake of being allowed to live together when she herself never wanted to marry would have been inauthentic because she would have been following someone else's rules.

De Beauvoir also argued that complete freedom depends on economic independence, something she would have lost in marriage. She states, "It is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap separating her from the male; work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom" (*Second* 737). By refusing to live with Sartre, instead living alone throughout her adult life, Simone de Beauvoir ensured her financial independence from him. She even claims that financial independence is necessary for the possibility of authentic love, where the man "represents an indispensable intermediary of herself to herself" in the same way the woman does for the man: "It would only be the same for woman," she says, "if she also existed essentially for-herself; this would imply that she possessed an economic independence that she projected herself towards her own ends and surpassed herself without any intermediary towards the group. Thus equal loves are possible" (*Second* 724). When she refused to marry Sartre, she was asserting this independence. She was able to support herself first on her teaching salary and then on her writing. In that sense,

she espoused what she proclaimed as true freedom: Financially, she depended on no one.¹

Anyone at all familiar with even a cursory account of Simone de Beauvoir's work and life would note that sexual freedom was just as important to her as economic freedom. The presence of additional relationships was natural, even necessary, for Simone and Jean-Paul in their long-term relationship. "What *we* have is an *essential* love," he explained to Simone, "but it is a good idea for us also to experience *contingent* love affairs" (Appignanesi 36). She certainly did allow herself to experience these "contingent love affairs," those relationships which had no specific purpose or meaning, and each time she entered into one of these affairs, it was her own decision to take it to a sexual level, "If I raised the question, it's because I wanted to," she said in one of her journals (Hawthorne 58). Her involvement with her students and others is yet another indication that she embraced radical freedom: Each choice she made was made consciously in the moment without concern for social expectation.

De Beauvoir recognized, however, that for women sexual freedom was far from easy to attain. She notes, "In France, especially, the free woman and the easy woman are stubbornly confused, as the idea of easy implies an absence of resistance and control, a lack, a very negation of freedom" (*Second* 746). While the free woman chooses to use and satisfy her sexuality as and when she wants (in a manner similar to that of many men), the easy woman is she who succumbs to the temptations of others without truly choosing for herself. In other words, the free woman is authentic and not acting in bad faith. The easy woman, while she may not necessarily be inauthentic, is at least acting in bad faith because she either does not choose for herself, or she has convinced herself that she is choosing for herself when truly she is not.

Perhaps de Beauvoir believed Sartre was actually helping women achieve sexual freedom through his sexual promiscuity. This could explain why she would often introduce young women to him; she was providing them with an opportunity for casual sex. From the beginning they knew (or should have known) that it would never develop into a serious relationship because of Sartre and de Beauvoir's commitment to each other, and Sartre was a rather small man, making him less physically intimidating or dangerous than other men these women could have been taking home. Unfortunately, some of these women did become emotionally attached to Sartre, and he even had rather long relationships with a few of them. In fact, most of the women were hurt by the permanence of his and de Beauvoir's relationship. However, because every person is free to choose, these women, even if

1. One could argue that she in fact relied upon the people who bought her books. However, she was as free financially as she could be in France's capitalist society, which may be why she was so drawn to communism – in such an economy, she wouldn't be dependant on the consumers purchasing her work, and she truly would be free.

hurt, made an informed choice to become involved with Sartre, thereby absolving both him and de Beauvoir of the responsibility of any emotional injury that resulted from their affairs with him. This posits an interesting moral and ethical dilemma: De Beauvoir and Sartre may have had their own motivations for the contingent affairs into which they entered, but was it logical to assume that the other people with whom they were having relationships shared their motivations? While it's true that we are all radically free, we still have to face different conditions, such as power relationships, as we pursue our freedom. To assume that women are incapable of entering into any type of affair with their eyes open is condescending to them, even if social conditions indicate that they may not be able to succeed in keeping the relationship strictly physical.

Although Simone de Beauvoir places a huge emphasis on the importance of freedom, she is sure to clarify that freedom does not justify immoral acts. In her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, she states, "the contingent spontaneity cannot be judged in the name of freedom" (41). She explains that, "In the passions which we shall call maniacal, to distinguish them from the generous passions, freedom does not find its genuine form" (64). Herein lies a striking difference between her and Sartre: She is concerned with morality, while he is not. Sartre operated on a "just do it" system. There is no God; therefore, there is no moral universe. De Beauvoir vehemently disagreed:

Because man is abandoned on earth, because his acts are definitive absolute engagements, he bears the responsibility which is not the work of a strange power, but of himself, where his defeats are inscribed, and his victories as well. A God can pardon, efface and compensate, but if God does not exist, man's faults are inextinguishable. (*Ethics* 16)

Thus our freedom creates our moral responsibility: Because we have freedom of choice, because there is no omnipotent being whom we can blame, we must take full responsibility for all of our actions, good and bad. These are the actions, which, at the end of our life, define who we were. If we are subjects only of our own moral universes, then we have the potential to be completely isolated within those individual universes. Authenticity and freedom taken to an extreme could mean that each individual is completely isolated. On the other hand, we could be radically engaged with the world around us; if we understand that we are responsible for all of our actions and their effects, then we might be even more attentive to their consequences. In her interviews, Simone de Beauvoir is constantly defending this line between isolation and engagement.

Inextricably intertwined with her ideas of freedom is Simone de Beauvoir's feminist philosophy, for which she is most famous. One could (and some do) spend years discussing and debating just this one facet of her life; she herself devotes almost one thousand pages to it in *The*

Second Sex, and it is the subject of almost every interview with her. She believes that women's physical difference from men is the only difference: "It comes from playing man's game to say that the woman is essentially different from the man. There exists a biological difference, but this difference is not the foundation for the sociological difference" ("Simone" 343). According to her, there is no biological reason why women should be treated differently from or as inferior to men; the biology does not justify the differences in status that society has created between men and women. Here, again, the principle of freedom plays a huge role: A woman can choose to accept her social training as a girl or not. De Beauvoir made the choice to overcome the traditional upbringing and education she had been given, which she believed was inferior to those of boys her age. In a 1985 interview, she said, "I thought that they [the boys at the College Stanislas] had a superior education, that's true. But in the end, I adapted to mine because I thought that later on I would be able to go on to higher education" ("Two" 16). Rather than accepting boys' superior education as an inevitable limitation on her, she decided to use what resources she did have – her natural intellect and intelligence and scanty education – to achieve what she wanted to achieve, which was to continue her education beyond high school. She continued in this manner throughout her life, refusing to allow society's prejudices to hinder her success. While other women had resigned themselves to the idea that because they were women they would have to take the *agrégation* five or six times before passing, Simone de Beauvoir succeeded the first time and received second place behind Sartre (it was his second attempt) and at the age of 21 became the youngest person ever to pass ("De Beauvoir").

In Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir found, for the first time in her life, someone she considered her intellectual equal; she described him as, "the dream companion I had longed for since I was fifteen" (*Memoirs* 2007). The two of them always had a strong influence on each other's work. When questioned about this in a 1979 interview, she replied, "I think we have had a reciprocal influence, that is, that each of us has criticized the works of the other." She emphasizes the distinction between her own work and Sartre's by declaring that she was "not a philosopher, but a literary writer; Sartre is the philosopher" ("Two" 13). When asked about her *Ethics of Ambiguity* in the context of being a philosopher, she responded:

For me it is not philosophy; it is an essay. For me, a philosopher is someone like Spinoza, Hegel, or Sartre; someone who has built a great system, and not simply someone who likes philosophy, who can teach it, understand it, and who can make use of it in essays. A philosopher is somebody who truly builds a philosophical system. And that, I did not do. ("Simone" 338)

In a later interview, she expanded upon and clarified this statement:

While I say that I am not a philosopher in the sense that I'm not the creator of a system, I'm still a philosopher in the sense that I've studied a lot of philosophy, I have a degree in philosophy, I've taught philosophy, I'm infused with philosophy, and when I put philosophy into my books it's because that's a way for me to view the world. ("Two" 20)

Simone de Beauvoir saw her writing as a way to express her philosophical beliefs, but generally in the context of a realistic situation, as in her novels, or in relation to her own life, as in her memoirs. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, which she refers to as an essay, she takes the existential concept of freedom, which had already been developed by philosophers such as Sartre, and she explains how morality and every day life are compatible with this idea. Her goal is to ground existentialist ethics in "history and concrete relationships rather than abstractions" ("Two"). Rather than developing a system, as she says true philosophers do, she is taking an aspect of an existing system and demonstrating how it is applicable and functional in our society.

In *The Second Sex*, however, she is very much a philosopher, even by her own definition. She spends a great deal of time painstakingly laying out principles of equality and freedom upon which a system could be built. One could even go so far as to say that she builds this system herself. Not only does she explain why women are equal to and have the same freedoms as men, but she elaborates on these foundations and informs us of how this equality can be attained: "They [women] must refuse the limits of their situation and seek to open paths to the future; resignation is only a surrender and an evasion; for woman there is no other way out than to work for her liberation" (680). She argues that although women have the choice to either rise up over their limitations or to accept them, these limitations would be greatly reduced if society modified its treatment of women and girls, thus making it easier for women to achieve equality with men: "Woman is the victim of no mysterious fate; the singularities that make her different derive their importance from the meaning applied to them; they can be overcome as soon as they are grasped from new perspectives" (779). Much of the criticism of de Beauvoir's feminist philosophy comes from a misunderstanding of her true goals for women's liberation. While it is true that de Beauvoir adopts an existentialist point of view in arguing that women need to overcome their differences, she uses this as a stepping-stone in a more dramatic proposal to change society as a whole and transform the significance of women's differences. Radical freedom is compatible with being socially conditioned. If little girls and boys were not, from their infancy, treated unequally and instilled with the notions that men are superior to women, it would be easier for women to make choices that lead to their freedom. She explains, "When she [a woman] starts her adult life, she does not have the same past as a boy; society does not see her with

the same eyes; she has a different perspective on the universe. Being a woman poses unique problems to an autonomous human being today.” Furthermore, “Even the woman who has emancipated herself economically from man is still not in a moral, social, or psychological situation identical to his” (739). De Beauvoir argues that in order to be in these same “situations” as man and “To be a complete individual, equal to man, woman has to have access to the male world as man does to the female one, access to the *other*; but the demands of the *other* are not symmetrical in the two cases” (741). De Beauvoir’s goal is not for each woman to rise up and overcome her challenges on her own but for women as a whole to create a new social order; truly she is calling for a Hegelian and Marxist cause of change – a crushing of the current system and creating a new paradigm in which women are subjects rather than simply objects.

De Beauvoir was very sure of her independence from Sartre; it is clear that it was extremely important to her that she be the feminist she promoted in *The Second Sex* because if she were not, she would be living an inauthentic life. She defended her long-term relationship with him against those who accused it of being anti-feminist: “We were very, very close. But that’s nothing contrary to feminism. Because I believe that one can be close to a man and be a feminist” (“Two” 24). She explains, “My independence has never been in danger because I have never unloaded any of my own responsibilities on Sartre” (*Force* 77). She also asserted that she never once sacrificed herself for him; she described herself as “completely adverse, the enemy of that idea,” and declared, “I never had the idea of sacrificing myself. ... I never sacrificed myself for Sartre, any more than he sacrificed for me” (“Two” 23). Although neither of them made any sacrifices in their relationship, they were not necessarily selfish; she says in *Force of Circumstance*: “He has helped me as I have helped him” (77). These two statements reveal what is most important to her, the ideas of reciprocity and equality. Neither she nor Sartre gave up what they took to be most important: their ideals and their commitment to each other. This preservation of personal ideals is extremely important, especially for a woman, who at that time, was expected to abandon any goals she may have had upon marriage. Although not married, it was essential to Simone de Beauvoir that, in her relationship with Sartre, she did not have to give up anything that was important to her.

It is important to note that helping someone, or doing something for another person is an authentic act as long as the motivation behind the act of helping comes from one’s own desire to give aid. Perhaps one point is that we are always already in relationships with others, so the real question becomes not whether we should help or sacrifice for others but instead how we can preserve our freedom and equality within these relationships, a question that de Beauvoir answers quite well:

To emancipate woman is to refuse to enclose her in the relations she sustains with man, but not to deny them ... each will remain an other for the other; reciprocity in their relations will not do

away with the miracles that the division of human beings into two separate categories engenders: desire, possession, love, dreams, adventure; and the words that move us: to give to conquer, and to unite will keep their meaning; on the contrary, it is when the slavery of half of humanity is abolished and with it the whole hypocritical system it implies that the division of humanity will reveal its authentic meaning and the human couple will discover its true form. (*Second* 782)

Through the philosophical system that she develops in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir instructs society on how to help women become independent. This independence, however, is not to be equated with isolation, as many people who accuse de Beauvoir of being hypocritical make the mistake of doing. Upon closer examination of her work, readers will learn that she does not denounce relationships between men and women as such; instead, she condemns those relationships in which there is no reciprocity, in which one party dominates the other.

In this sense, Simone de Beauvoir truly embodied her own philosophy. Though at first glance, her relationship with Sartre may seem anti-feminist and contradictory to her values and principles, it truly was a reciprocal relationship; they had an intellectual and emotional understanding that may be difficult to explain, but can best be understood with a knowledge of de Beauvoir's philosophy of authentic love. She wasn't living inauthentically or in bad faith by convincing herself that Sartre was someone he wasn't. What they had in their relationship was equality, reciprocity, and freedom, the principles which de Beauvoir valued above all else. She maintained her independence and lived for herself, not allowing society's standards to lead her into authenticity or bad faith. If she had convinced herself of being or not being a certain kind of person, it was only with regards to her idea that she was no philosopher; though creating a philosophical system may not have been her sole objective, she certainly created one in *The Second Sex*, providing women and society as a whole with the means to allow equality between men and women. This does not necessarily mean she was living in bad faith; what she accomplished is more important than what she called it. What's significant are the goals she was aiming for – equality, reciprocity, writing, thinking – and in refusing to call herself a philosopher, she was defining her own identity in relation to Sartre. One could argue that to try to stake out an identity in distinction to Sartre is bad faith; some have even gone as far as to claim that she felt inferior to him, which is why she refused the title of philosopher. However, it is not necessary for her to have felt inferior to him in order to want to distinguish herself from him, precisely for good reasons of authenticity: She is not Sartre. Authenticity is not simply about isolated action, it is about taking up one's action with others in a way that is true to oneself, and she clearly did just that.

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